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曹顺庆 俞志强 主编

何宝璋 刘荣 傅其林 副主编

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Imparting China: Some Reflections on Five Decades of Chinese Language Teaching in New Zealand

Hongyu Gong
(*Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand*)

Abstract: Since its introduction in the mid-1960s, the teaching of the Chinese language in New Zealand has staked a claim at the table of arts and humanities by emphasizing, first, the importance and antiquity of Chinese civilization and then China's political and economic relevance. In spite of the increasingly close ties between the two countries, Chinese language teaching in New Zealand seems to be at odds with the direction of the country itself. One glaring puzzle has been the ebb that followed the surge in Chinese language teaching and related initiatives in the mid to late 1990s. Why is this so? A historical survey of a half-century of Chinese language teaching in New Zealand may help to explain the conundrum.

Key words: New Zealand; Chinese language teaching; universities; polytechnics schools

中文教学五十年：新西兰的中文教学反思

| 新西兰国立尤尼坦理工学院　宫宏宇

内容提要：自20世纪六十年代中期被正式引进到新西兰大学后，中文教学在新西兰已有近五十年的历史。但与世界其他地区不同的是，新西兰虽然与中国在政治和经济上有良好的往来，但近年来中文教学的开展并不令人乐观。这是为什么？本文拟通过追溯和反思新西兰近半个世纪的中文教学来解析这一问题。

关键词：新西兰　中文教学　大学　理工学院　中小学

Introduction

As New Zealand's largest non-European and non-Polynesian ethnic group, the Chinese were some of New Zealand's earliest immigrants and now make up the fifth largest ethnic group in the country, with nearly 150,000 residents. The story of Chinese language teaching is deeply embedded in New Zealand history and aspects of Chinese culture are evident throughout New Zealand today (Ng 1993, Bradshaw 2009, Campbell 2005, Beattie 2007, Beattie 2011). So much so that, as claimed by one historian, "Elements of Chineseness are part of everyone's lives in New Zealand, not just those who are ethnically Chinese" (Moloughney 2005: 398). Yet, in spite of the close ties between the two countries, Chinese language teaching in New Zealand seems to be at odds with the trajectory of the country itself, which of late has become economically, demographically and politically more closely intertwined with the People's Republic of China. One glaring puzzle has been the ebb that followed the surge in Chinese language teaching and related initiatives in the mid to late 1990s. Why is this so? A historical survey of a half-century of Chinese language teaching in New Zealand may shed some light on the conundrum.

Maintaining Chinese Literacy: Chinese Language Teaching before 1966

New Zealand's relationship with China began in the late 1790s when Canton and Macau became its first imperial market for sealskins (Belich 2001: 128). Despite the commercial importance of China and the early presence of Chinese miners in the Otago goldfields, there was no evidence of the Chinese language being taught in New Zealand in this period of Sino-New Zealand interaction. This does not mean that the New Zealand Chinese felt no need to preserve their own cultural heritage, but was rather due to the fact that the early Chinese immigrants were almost without exception all miners from Southern China who were barely literate in their own lan-

guage. As well as this, like their Cantonese gold-seeker peers in Australia and North America, they were sojourners with the twin aims of "Gold and China" (Ng 2003: 7). This situation did not change until after the Second World War when the number of Chinese people swelled, and their social circles widened. During these post-war years, New Zealand Chinese did their best to maintain Chinese literacy despite the New Zealand government's promotion of assimilation policies and its refusal to grant entry visas for Chinese teachers. They set up weekend community schools and organised cultural activities for those parents who worried about how their offspring would maintain their language and culture if they couldn't return to China. The Chinese churches and the Chinese Associations in the larger centres such as Auckland, Wellington, Hamilton, Gisborne, and Dunedin became the focal points of such activities (Chang 2007: 101—105).

Gaining a Foothold in Academia: 1966-1989

The 1960s and 1970s portrayed two trends. Whilst on the one hand, the 1960s was a time when Chinese in New Zealand became less willing to learn Chinese, on the other hand, it saw the University of Auckland provide leadership in the development of Chinese Studies at all levels of the education system.

Unlike the gold rush years when Chinese miners took an active part in local communities (Ng 2011), the Chinese sojourners in the 1950s and 1960s did little to perpetuate the institutions, festivals and traditions of their native land. Festivals such as the Chinese Spring Festival, Dragon Boat and Moon Festival, where Chinese language and aspects of Chinese culture were on display, were being observed only by a few first-generation Chinese in private homes (Fong 1959: 51—52). During the two decades which followed the Second World War the majority of Chinese New Zealanders were reluctant to assert their Chineseness by promoting Chinese language and culture outside their homes.

The 1960s and 1970s may be regarded as a low point in Chinese language teaching as far as the Chinese community is concerned. Reasons for this include New Zealand's restrictive immigration laws, shortages of Chi-

nese teachers, but the most important factor was a change of heart on the part of the New Zealand Chinese themselves. The previously passive mentality of "temporary sojourn" of the Chinese had evolved into an active effort to be part of the mainstream society. However, the desire to be inconspicuous on the part of the Chinese resulted in a deliberate erasure of any sign of Chineseness. This was most evident in the generation gap between the different attitudes of the Chinese who had come from China, and their descendants born in New Zealand. To the older generation of Chinese who had come from China, New Zealand was only the place where they lived and worked but not their permanent home. China was where their roots were and Cantonese was their native language. Whereas for those who had been born in New Zealand and grown up in the country, New Zealand was home. China was just a vague and not very wonderful concept. Although they had no choice but to use Cantonese to communicate with their parents at home, they were more used to speaking English. Besides, most Chinese children were ashamed to be Chinese. To them, the Chinese language not only had no practical value and took a lot of time to learn, but it was also something one could take no pride in. Even though their parents did all they could to pressure them into learning the language, they themselves only reluctantly went through the motions, and some even openly rejected Chinese. Their negativity toward Chinese culture in general and Chinese language in particular partly explains the lack of development in Chinese language learning in New Zealand in this period.

However, the 1960s were also epoch-making years insofar as introducing Chinese language to mainstream New Zealand society is concerned. It was in 1966 that New Zealand's largest university, the University of Auckland, established a Department of Asian Languages and Literatures. With the arrival in December 1965 of Douglas Lancashire, an Englishman born of China missionary parents, the teaching and research of Chinese in New Zealand academia had formally begun (Tarling 2010: 30—36).

The 1970s saw the launching of a number of government initiatives to promote Chinese learning. One specific measure was the allocation of funds for scholarships under the China Exchange Project to encourage university

graduates to go to China for study. This initiative not only proved to be visionary but also produced tangible results by facilitating Chinese teaching and research in New Zealand. For example, in 1994, Paul Clark, "a member of the first generation to benefit from the introduction of Asia-related topics into the school and university curricula" (Clark 1994) and one of the first three New Zealand students to go to China under a government-sponsored exchange programme, was headhunted by the University of Auckland to head its Department of Asian Languages and Literatures.

Promoting Chinese at Polytechnics and Schools: 1990-present

In 1966 when the Asian Languages Department was set up at Auckland University, there were only forty-four students who elected to take Chinese, and in the years following the numbers did not increase much at all (Tarling 2010: 36). The average number of first year students was about thirty, of whom the great majority (85－90%) were of European descent. Their motivation for studying Chinese ranged from an interest in ancient Chinese civilization to a fascination with the mysterious Eastern culture outside of Western tradition (Sanders 1996). The other small group of students (10－15%) were South-east Asian Chinese, most of whom already had some basic knowledge of the Chinese language and could speak a number of regional dialects. For the reasons discussed above, New Zealand Chinese students did not develop any interest in studying Chinese at this time (Sanders 1996).

Anoticeable change took place in the late 1980s after the New Zealand government liberalised its immigration policy to attract Asian business investment. The subsequent arrival of affluent Chinese migrants (mainly from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore) resulted in an attitude change in some segments of New Zealand society towards Chinese language. Instead of being seen as a fringe language of little relevance to the wellbeing of the mainstream New Zealand society, Chinese was viewed as an international language with practical economic benefits. This change of perception was closely linked to the Asian Economic Miracle and to the New Zealand government's putting its main emphasis in economic develop-

ment onto trade with the Asia-Pacific region. As a result, New Zealand students began to choose Chinese as one of the subjects in their course of study. To meet market demand, New Zealand universities set up Chinese courses one after the other. In the North Island, Massey University in Palmerston North was the first to offer a correspondence course in 1989. A year later, the University of Waikato in Hamilton also set up a Chinese degree programme. Not to be outdone, the two South Island-based universities, Otago and Canterbury, also established masters and bachelors programmes in the early and mid－1990s. By the late 1990s, all but one of New Zealand's eight universities offered degrees in Chinese. Some of them even offer degrees at doctoral level. The University of Auckland has the largest and most comprehensive China-related programmes. In recent years, its School of Asian Studies has produced a large number of PhDs, masters and bachelors graduates. These graduates have provided personnel for universities, polytechnics and government agencies not only in New Zealand but also in the United States, Hong Kong, Singapore, Britain and Australia.

Whileuniversities were building comprehensive and solid programmes, some of the New Zealand institutes of technology and polytechnics also began to develop undergraduate courses that focus on China. For example, the Auckland Institute of Technology (now AUT University) began to offer a BA in Chinese in 1995 and was followed by Unitec Institute of Technology, also in Auckland, in 2005. Although not at a degree level, the Wellington Polytechnic and Christchurch Polytechnic also started to offer Chinese language programmes ranging from Oral Chinese to Business Chinese in the early 1990s.

China's rapid economic growth in the 1990s also caused the New Zealand government to make major changes in its national language policy. In its policy report issued in 1992, Chinese was designated as a language of utmost importance for the first time, along with some other Asian languages. In the same year, the New Zealand Ministry of Education directed the planning unit of the New Zealand national curriculum office to draw up a draft for primary and secondary-level teaching of Chinese so as to facilitate

Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools. In 1994 Roger Mc Clay, the Associate Minister of Education, signed a protocol with his counterpart at the Chinese Ministry of Education in Beijing which included China sending teaching experts to New Zealand to help draft the Chinese syllabus, New Zealand sending teachers of Chinese to China for training and the New Zealand Ministry of Education inviting a Chinese language advisor to assist in the work of promoting and popularising Chinese at New Zealand schools. One result of this agreement was the arrival of Professor Zhang Zhanyi of the Beijing University of Languages and Cultures arrived in Wellington in 1995 as the first National Chinese language advisor. In 1998, the HSK Chinese Proficiency Examination began to establish an examination centre in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland. In August 2000, the New Zealand Education Minister Trevor Mallard asked the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to run a School Certificate Examination in Chinese so that students studying Chinese as a second language were able to sit School Certificate in the subject (NZ Government 2000).

Conclusion: Challenges Ahead

Despite the flourish in the 1990s, developments in Chinese language teaching in New Zealand have, on the whole, been uneven and poorly coordinated. The greatest difficulty for New Zealand's Chinese teaching has been the lack of popularisation of secondary school Chinese teaching (Cumming 2011). In 1997, for example, only 120 secondary school students chose Chinese as a sixth form subject (*NZ Education Review* 1998). In the 36 secondary schools which offered Chinese, there were only 900 students learning the language, less than one twenty-sixth of the number studying Japanese. Sadly, recent surveys do not show any sign of progress. Disappointed that the number of secondary school students studying Mandarin (2019 in 2010) had only just overtaken the number learning Latin (1786), Prime Minister John Key reportedly urged young New Zealanders to improve their general understanding of Chinese culture and suggested a campaign was needed to have Mandarin taught in schools. Indeed, of New Zealand's 2,500 schools, "only 101 offer Chinese language classes,

many after school hours" (Cumming 2011) . This is certainly at odds with the direction of the country itself, which has meanwhile become economically, demographically and politically more intertwined with China. Fortunately, this conundrum has attracted the attention of policy makers, educators as well as business and industry leaders (Davison 2013), and it is to be hoped that it will not be long before the situation is improved.

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Author's Description

Dr. Hongyu Gong 宫宏宇 (hgong@unitec.ac.nz) is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Language Studies at Unitec Institute of Technology in

New Zealand. His research interests include modern Chinese cultural history; Chinese music and politics; Chinese popular and folk culture; ethnomusicology, and the rise of Western music in China.